Chapter 4

Learning from children:

Experiences and needs of children in the Dutch child protection system

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Abstract

Children are primary service users in the context of child protection and have the right to share their views in all matters affecting them. In this qualitative study, we interviewed 11 children about their experiences with a trajectory in the Dutch child protection system (CPS). Our reflexive thematic analysis shows that children experience that such a trajectory strongly impacts their lives. In this overwhelming trajectory, children want to be cared about, taken seriously and understood. According to them, professionals need to be really motivated and dedicated to help them, enabling them to go on with their (daily) life as much and as soon as possible. Furthermore, children need the opportunity to tell what they want to tell, clarity and honesty, and respect for (the bond with) their parents. This study provides important recommendations for the CPS. First, ensuring continuity and stability in children's living circumstances is important for their well-being and development. Furthermore, respecting and responding to children's individual personality and needs, as well as ensuring their participation are essential for them to experience some control and security in the child protection trajectory and their lives.

Keywords: children's experiences, child protection, participatory research, children's participation, thematic analysis

4.1 Introduction

According to the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the best interests of the child needs to be a first consideration in all decisions concerning children; decisions should be optimal for the child's well-being and development (CRC, 2013). Children involved in child protection often experience an inadequate quality of important environmental conditions (such as physical or emotional safety and continuity in care relationships), which forms a serious threat for their well-being and development (Jones, LaLiberte, & Piescher, 2015; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006). As States have to undertake all appropriate measures for the implementation of children's rights, the child protection system (CPS) plays an important role in supporting children's well-being and development in line with children's needs.

According to Gaskell (2010), children's well-being is shaped by their experiences with care and therefore "… the basis of improving children's outcomes should include listening to and understanding what children need from the care system" (p. 136). Article 12 of the UNCRC implies that children are primary service users whose views should be an essential element in decision-making and service evaluations (CRC, 2011; Heimer et al., 2018; Lundy, 2007). Several studies show the uniqueness of children's perspectives and the value of children's feedback, and therefore underline the importance of knowledge about children's experiences for decision-making and evaluation on the individual as well as the service level (Davies & Wright, 2008; Gaskell, 2010; Woolfson et al., 2010). Therefore, children should be active participants when studying child protection systems, rather than 'objects of the study' (Grover, 2004; Holland, 2009).

4.1.1 Children's experiences

Children construct their experiences with care mainly through their *interactions and relationships with professionals* (Gaskell, 2010). Jobe and Gorin (2013) describe that children mainly judge the services they receive by their contact with the professionals and explain how children's views often vary at different points in the process as a direct result of the interaction with the individual professional concerned. It is important for children to experience that they are cared for by professionals and that professionals are willing to help them: showing respect and interest, caring about what children are thinking and being accessible and reliable are building blocks for a positive relationship between children and professionals (Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Pöllki et al., 2012).

Regarding the contact with professionals, research emphasizes the importance of developing *trust relationships* (Dillon et al., 2016). Jobe and Gorin (2013) underline that a consistent, long-term relationship is fundamental in the investigation process for disclosure of maltreatment as well as for successful engagement with services during this process. However, they also report on the difficulties in building trust relationships due to frequent changes of professionals and scarce contacts with professionals.

Furthermore, research shows the importance of *children's participation* in the interaction with professionals. Pöllki and colleagues (2012) describe that this relationship can enable children's participation and underline the importance of being listened to and provided with relevant information by adults, especially for children in the CPS as they often experienced difficult situations with adults. Children underline the importance of participation as the decisions made in child protection highly impact their lives (Pöllki et al., 2012; Van Bijleveld et al., 2014). First, children emphasize the importance of being adequately informed: informing children fully, clearly, repeatedly and in a child-friendly way at all levels and stages is crucial for their participation in the process (Dillon et al., 2016; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Second, children value being listened to and their views being taken into account in decision-making (Davies & Wright, 2008; Gaskell, 2010; Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Van Bijleveld et al. (2014) report on the importance of listening to children's opinions as they want to feel that their opinion counts and that they are taken seriously.

4.1.2 The Dutch CPS

The Youth Act 2015 forms the legal basis for the Dutch youth care system. The Advice and Reporting Centre Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment (in Dutch: *Advies- en Meldpunt Huiselijk Geweld en Kindermishandeling* – AMHK), the Child Care and Protection Board (in Dutch: *Raad voor de Kinderbescherming* – RvdK), the juvenile court and certified agencies play a key role in this CPS. Everyone can call the AMHK to ask for advice or to report concerns regarding child maltreatment. The AMHK can advise the caller or can start an investigation and refer the family to different organizations offering voluntary support. When a compulsory child protection measure seems necessary, the RvdK becomes involved: the RvdK investigates the necessity of such a measure and can request the juvenile court to enforce it. This court can enforce a supervision order in which the parental authority is partly taken over, an out-of-home placement of a child, or a measure ending the parental authority. These child protection measures are performed by guardians of certified agencies (Memorie van Toelichting Jeugdwet, 2013).

4.1.3 Aim of this study

This study aims to gain insight into the experiences and needs of children in the Dutch CPS to learn how the CPS can best support them. This study provides the opportunity to children to reflect on a system that recently changed with the introduction of the Youth Act 2015. Furthermore, by giving a comprehensive description of the methodology, we provide knowledge for future research projects studying children's experiences. With this study, we aim to answer the following research question: 'How do children experience a trajectory in the Dutch CPS and what are their needs for support during the trajectory?'

4.2 Methodology

Research on child protection is a relational process involving power dimensions between adults and children (Horgan, 2017; Lundy et al., 2011; Nilsson et al., 2015). We aimed to minimize our use of power by involving children in the different phases of this study, as the methods used for data collection and the data analysis impact children and as the involvement of children as active participants in research can improve the quality of the

study (CRC, 2009; Hill, 2006; Lundy et al., 2011). As we are aware that we as researchers still can play a role in the construction of children's experiences via the interaction with the children during the study, transparency and reflexivity are required to give insight into the research process and the (rationales for) our choices in this (Probst, 2015; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

4.2.1 Children's and professionals' advice

To get insight into how to investigate children's experience with child protection, we asked for advice from young people involved in child protection and professionals in the field of youth care. We had a group meeting with a youth advisory group, and three individual interviews with two girls of 16 years old and one girl of 18 years old. Furthermore, we interviewed four professionals: a trainer on 'talking with children', a psychologist of a child protection agency who involves children in child protection investigations and trains practitioners in communicating with children, a psychologist working at a school for children with physical and/or mental disabilities, and a psychologist working in the field of trauma treatment. We developed our research methodology based on their advice on recruitment, information provision and interviewing children.

4.2.2 Participants

Recruitment. Based on the young people's advice to avoid the use of (too much) written text, we developed a whiteboard animation video with spoken text to inform children about the research project and to invite them to participate. We invited children from 6 to 18 years old who had been in contact with child protection in the last three years. We posted the video on social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), and asked people in our network to share this. Furthermore, the Child Ombudsperson posted the video on their social network pages, as was also done by some youth advisory groups and organizations. Besides this, we contacted different agencies in the field of child protection to invite children to participate in our study. Children, parents and professionals could contact us to discuss their questions and their participation.

Sample. We interviewed 11 children (8 girls, 3 boys) between 8 and 18 years old (average age of 13). The reasons for the child protection investigation included among other things domestic violence, high conflict divorces, support needed for contact with the father, sexual abuse, and severe psychological problems of the child. Regarding children's trajectories in the CPS, four children experienced an investigation of the AMHK followed by voluntary support. For seven children, a compulsory child protection measure was enforced by the juvenile court (a supervision order for five children and ending of the parental authority for two children). For three of these seven children these measures were enforced recently after an investigation of the RvdK; they shared their experiences with this investigation as well as with the child protection measure. However, the other four children did not remember the investigation prior to the enforcement of the child protection measure and could only share their experiences with this measure (i.e., their experiences with their guardians or their experiences with an out-of-home placement after a long period of a supervision order). Five children were living with their mother (three with voluntary support, two with a supervision order) and six children were placed out of home (one child with only voluntary support, three children with a supervision order, two children with a measure ending the parental authority).

4.2.3 Data collection

Qualitative approach. We studied children's experiences with the CPS using semi-structured interviews. By using open questions and a flexible interview scheme, we wanted to give children the opportunity to construct their story in their own way, address what was important to them, and share their experiences in their own words.

Content of the interview. We followed children's trajectory throughout the CPS and asked open questions about the different phases (e.g. report, investigation, juvenile court, and intervention). Next, we asked children's recommendations for the CPS and reflected with them on their most important messages and ideas for dissemination of the research results. Finally, we asked for their feedback on the interview.

Empowering children in sharing their experiences. Besides the content of the interview, we considered the way of interviewing carefully to ensure that we would enable and support children in sharing their experiences in the best way. By enabling children's

choice and control during the interview, we wanted to develop a high-trust situation in which children would feel empowered to share their experiences. For instance, we gave children choice regarding the location and moment of the interview, and whether they wanted other persons (e.g. their parents) to attend the interview. We started the interview with 'breaking the ice' by telling children something about ourselves. We explained the interview situation and checked children's understanding and expectations, highlighting that they did not have to answer questions or discuss topics they did not want to and emphasized again that we wanted to learn from them and that therefore there were no 'wrong' answers. During the interview, we followed children in their story and were flexible in the use of additional research materials, such as timelines or drawings to visualise our questions.

Pilot. We piloted this approach and interview scheme with a girl involved in the preparations of our study. She told us that the questions were sufficiently open and gave room to decide herself what she wanted to share and in how much detail; this made her feel more comfortable. The pilot led to an extra question addressing important considerations and criteria when the child would be the one employing child protection professionals. Furthermore, this pilot study underlined the need to use the interview scheme in a flexible way in order to adjust to the differences in children's child protection trajectories and the unique way they constructed their story.

4.2.4 Data analysis

The recruitment started in March 2018 and the interviews were conducted by the first author and a junior researcher, between April and September 2018. All interviews were face-to-face during home visits or in a public place. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted with the child individually. In three interviews the mother was present. We recorded the interviews and transcribed these literally. The two researchers who conducted the interviews analysed the interviews thematically in an inductive and reflexive way, using Nvivo 11 (Mortelmans, 2011).

After transcribing the interview, we read the transcript and listened to the recording of the interview to *familiarise ourselves* with the data. Then, we *coded* each transcript in a semantic way. We used an inductive approach, which made us link the codes

strongly to the children's own words in the data. After this, we started looking for the relationships between the codes and organised these codes into *clusters.* We presented this set of clusters of each individual interview in a *diagram* and explained this in a *synthesis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mortelmans, 2011). These syntheses provided insight into the analysis of the interviews and how the clusters within these interviews were linked to each other.

The different steps of the data analysis were flexible and iterative: we constantly got back to the raw data to check whether our understanding and interpretation of the interview was still representing the story of the child (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The two researchers involved in the data collection and data analysis supported each other in these steps by constantly discussing their thoughts, ideas and questions and by providing feedback on each other's codes, clusters, diagrams and syntheses. This contributed to the further development of the analysis.

The aforementioned steps resulted in 11 syntheses. Next, we tried to identify links between the children's stories. We organised the syntheses in *themes* by reviewing them and searching for important themes in each story and across stories. In the final step, we aimed to represent the links between the themes in a *thematic network* (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

In order to diminish our power and role in the construction of children's story, we involved them in the interpretation and analysis of their story. At the end of each interview, we discussed the most important messages to give children the chance to reflect on the information shared (Probst, 2015; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). During the data analysis, we provided children the possibility to give feedback on the synthesis, emphasizing that we wanted to be sure that we really captured 'their story'.

4.2.5 Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences at the University of Groningen in February 2018. We anonymised the transcripts by deleting identifiable information such as the names and residences of the children and stored the recordings and transcripts at the secured network of our university;

these were only accessible for the researchers involved in the study, who signed a confidentiality agreement.

Informed consent. The children, parents and/or guardians with parental authority signed an informed consent document. By signing this document, they agreed that they were well-informed about the focus of the research project, the child's participation, the anonymity and confidentiality, the limits of this confidentiality, the recording of the interview, the voluntariness of the participation, and the option to quit during the entire process. We discussed those aspects with the children prior to the interview and showed the video again to repeat the information. We checked the expectations of the child and whether the child understood the information.

Emotional distress. We involved professionals and children in considering how to avoid causing emotional distress by discussing certain sensitive topics in the interviews. Before starting the interview, we informed children that they could always quit or take a break and ensured that they felt comfortable to quit or to not answer questions. During the interview, we discussed our observations when we felt that the child was distressed. Finally, we tried to conclude the interview with positive emotions for the children, asked them about their experience with the interview and guaranteed that they had our contact information in case they wanted to discuss anything about their interview. Besides this, when we had the idea that the child was distressed about the information shared during the interview, we could also decide to contact the child the day after to hear how the child was doing.

Safety protocol. We informed children about the limits of the confidentiality in case of concerns about the safety and well-being of family members. Based on the recommendations of the young people and professionals, we developed a protocol including guidelines on how to deal with concerns about the well-being or safety of a family member.

4.3 Results

The children share their positive as well as negative experiences with the different phases of the child protection trajectory, provide clear feedback about their needs in this trajectory and look back on their own reactions, feelings and attitudes in a reflective way. Our thematic analysis resulted in nine basic themes. We organised these themes in a thematic network (Figure 1) of two organising themes. First, children address the *impact a child protection trajectory* has on them and their lives. Second, children state what they *need* in this overwhelming trajectory. We further discuss the content of these themes below.

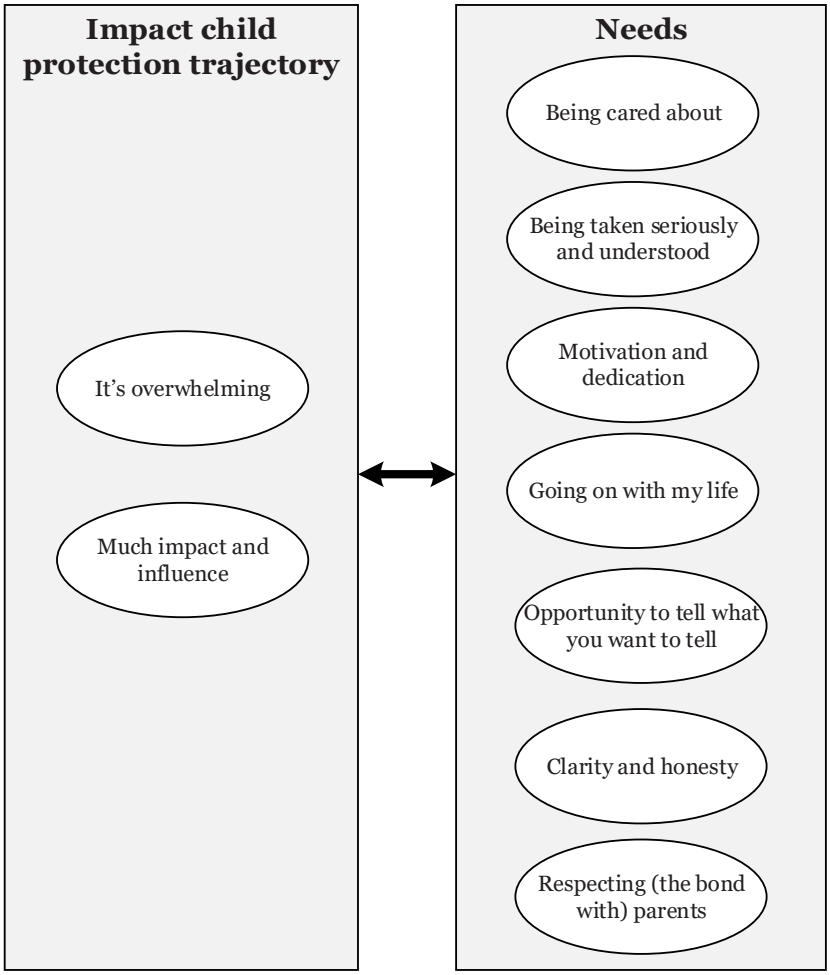

Figure 1. Thematic network of children's experiences (themes are grouped into two organising and nine basic themes)

4.3.1 Impact child protection trajectory

It is overwhelming. *"It's all going so fast at such a moment, because you make a referral and then a sort of fast train starts running. Yes, that is quite difficult to follow and to remember."*

Children experience that the involvement of the CPS can be overwhelming. This can be experienced as a chaotic situation because many things needed to be arranged and done, which can make that not everything is clear to children at that moment. Most children explain that they have been in contact with many professionals through conversations in the investigation phase, were placed in several foster families or institutions, or had several guardians. Some children explicitly state that the collaboration between all these organizations and professionals needs to be improved, whereas others would have preferred having one contact person in the overall trajectory.

Much impact and influence. *"And that they came to take me from home with ten persons. Of course, I just went with them calmly, but it was quite a shock."*

The children emphasize that being involved in a child protection trajectory highly impacts their lives. First, the decisions made have much influence on their lives. Several children tell about the impact of an out-of-home placement and a teenage girl underlines the importance of accurate investigations and carefully thinking as this decision-making is 'a very serious task' and certain decisions can 'follow you your whole life'. She also shares a positive example of this, explaining how a judge expressed that she found it a difficult decision and needed to think about and discuss this one more day. Second, children share that, besides the decisions, the involvement of the CPS can bring stress and tension. For example, several children express the tension they experienced prior to a court meeting.

4.3.2 Needs

Being cared about. *"She helped me as she really wanted to help me. For others I think it was more just their job; when they went home, it was done, and what happened with you didn't have influence on them. Whereas when I would be very bad, [name] would also suffer from this. But when I would feel bad, this wouldn't be such a problem for [name], she just did what she had to do and that's all. I think that is a very big difference."*

Children value professionals who are concerned about them and who are there for them. First, they address that they value caring and kind professionals who care about them and view helping them as more than 'just their job'.

Second, they value professionals who support them and are there for them, so that they feel that they can really call on them. To ensure this, professionals should take time and be reachable. Two young children share their positive experiences with having a child coach, whose unique role is to have individual contact with the child at a regular base. Furthermore, children feel more supported when professionals dare to stand up for them.

Being taken seriously and understood. *"She is nice. […] She shows a lot of sympathy. She is not like the other guardian. When I am angry, I can just rant and rave to her. […] Then she first let me blow off steam and then she looks, together with me, for a solution."*

To experience to be taken seriously, it is first of all important for children to be respected and 'not treated like a little child'. A young girl shares her experiences about a child protection investigator telling her that she *had to* leave the living room: *"At a certain moment they said: 'Now you have to leave'. Really 'have to'. I felt that they were not being nice, I didn't feel good about that at all. […] As they suddenly wanted to talk with mama alone, but I thought we experienced the same, so why can I not be there? I am also quite curious myself, so I didn't like it at all."* She felt that the investigators were 'bossy' and did not take her seriously.

Second, children value professionals who listen to them and are understanding. It is important that professionals are open to what children want. For example, a girl felt not understood during the investigation, as the professional still wanted the meeting together with the girl's father despite that she stated feeling unsafe in that situation.

Third, children state that they find it important that professionals are 'real' and try to get to know them; professionals should not be 'fake' and 'act as if they know you already'. They should adopt a personal approach instead of offering a 'standard package', 'as every child is unique'. A girl tells: *"It was already decided what should happen with me, as this and this is described as being effective for 'girls like me' and that is how you are being treated: you are like this. Although it could maybe feel very different for me than for someone else who experienced this."*

Motivation and dedication. *"That they are really engaged with you and don't think that it will come itself someday. But that they arrange things more quickly, and just arrange it and don't leave it."*

Children need to experience that professionals are really motivated and devoted to support them. They address the importance of listening to and taking seriously what children want, during the process, but also regarding treatment or support and decisions. For instance, a young boy emphasizes the importance of talking with children about their wishes. He did understand that he had to leave his current foster family, but he wanted to live in a foster family in the same city, so that he could stay at the same school. He tells that the juvenile court did not talk with him and that the guardian did not listen to him.

Besides listening to children's wishes, it is important for children that professionals arrange issues that are important for them and that this does not take too long. Some children experience that 'nothing happens' or that it takes too long before important issues are arranged. This can lead to feelings of disappointment and mistrust to share wishes and needs. A young girl explains that she asked her guardian several times to discuss with her parents that she wants to stay at her father's place at a fixed-day weekly, so that she can play sports again. However, she tells that the guardian 'never writes this down and forgets this all the time', which makes that she has to ask this 'over and over again'.

Going on with my life. *"I hope that you can just have a happy life and do nice things, with each other."*

Children want their (daily) life going on and getting back to normal as much as possible and as soon as possible. First, children express that it is hard for them when the child protection trajectory takes a long time. Several children share how ongoing involvement of child protection agencies for years (e.g. by ongoing court meetings) gives them stress. Second, children state that it is hard when it takes long before important issues are being arranged. For instance, some children express how hard it is when it takes long to arrange contact with their parents (a young girl tells that arranging the support to re-establish contact with her father, and thereby arranging the first contact, took ten months). Third, children share that it is important to them that their daily activities (such as school, sport and doing 'fun things') can 'go on' *during* the child protection trajectory. An 8-year old girl explains that she was never involved in scheduling meetings and how these interfered with her sports, which made that she had to cancel sports several times.

Opportunity to tell what you want to tell. *"Everyone can tell things about me, but they can never... It feels better when I tell it myself. I am who I am, and you cannot know that."*

When meeting with professionals, children first address the importance of professionals listening carefully to them to really get the opportunity to share what they want to share. A boy tells that he could not share his whole story and answer the questions during the child protection investigation: *"[They] went too fast. Like you say two letters and then they already asked the next question. Then you are still busy with your own answer, as you just want to tell more, so that it becomes clear, but then they already start with something else."* Other children share examples about not feeling listened to when the professional was busy with the computer or taking notes all the time and not making eye contact.

Besides carefully listening, children address the importance of getting choice in *how* they share their views and *what* they share. For instance, two girls tell that when face-to-face interviews are too hard, writing a letter may be a good alternative. Some

children address the importance of a face-to-face meeting in an informal setting, at home or outside with a coffee, and stress the importance of privacy in these conversations.

Furthermore, it can be hard for children to talk (in detail) about certain topics. Continuously asking them to do so can feel like 'rubbing salt into a wound'. They find it important that they *can* instead of *have to* tell and want to have the opportunity to stop discussing certain topics (such as details about the violence or abuse). A girl tells about her guardian: *"She had the nerve to want me to tell everything I experienced. […] She wanted to know exactly, in detail, what happened. I thought: You are no police officer, you are no therapist!"*

Clarity and honesty. *"Then you are like: 'Okay, but why are you here?' […] I just like to know what is going on. Also surprises, you know, I can't handle that. I need to be able to prepare myself. Actually, a lot of children have this."*

Children need clarity to know where they stand. Professionals have to be honest towards them by 'telling it the way it is' and providing them clear information. First, children want to be informed about the process to know what is happening. A girl expresses her satisfaction about a meeting with the public prosecutor after the court meeting: *"After the court meeting I could sit with her and discuss what was important for her, where she focused on, which sentence she charged and how she came to this. I think she explained this very clearly. At least I liked it that I had the idea that I could participate a bit. […] So I liked it, as I didn't want to attend the court meeting, that I could do something like this in place. Or at least had the idea like 'okay, the people who defended me did understand me'."*

Second, children value clear and honest information about the decisions and choices that are made. A girl explains that despite that the institution she stayed did not feel as the right place for her, professionals still decided that she had to stay here. Although she did understand the decision about the out-of-home placement, she did not understand why she had to stay in this institution as the reasons for this decision were not explained to her; she felt very bad about this and it made her feel that the professionals who had decided this were against her.

Respecting (the bond with) parents. *"[I told the guardian:] 'Stay away from my mother, she is my mother, and she can decide if I can give her a hug or not!' […] So yes, I wanted to protect my mother."*

Children emphasize the importance of contact with their parents and they want professionals to respect the bond with their parents and their loyalty to them. Several children address their wish of professionals arranging contact with their parents. For instance, three children (8 to 12 years old) living with their mothers share the importance of contact with their fathers and how hard it is for them that they did not have contact with their father for a long period of time.

Furthermore, professionals need to understand children's loyalty towards their parents and be respectful towards parents. How professionals manage to satisfy this need seems to be shaping children's attitude towards them. A young girl tells about her guardian: *"The second [guardian] once made me very sad. […] She said various things about my mum and I didn't like that. So, I didn't want to see her anymore for some time."*

4.4 Discussion

According to the UNCRC, the CPS plays an important role in protecting and improving children's well-being and development (CRC, 2013). This study provides insight into children's experiences with their 'journey' through a trajectory in the Dutch CPS and what children need during this process. This study shows that the (duration of the) trajectory has much impact on children and their lives. It underlines the importance of ensuring continuity and stability in children's living circumstances as much and as soon as possible, respecting and responding to children's individual personality and needs, as well as enabling children's participation; this is essential for children to experience being cared about, and to have some power, control and security in this overwhelming trajectory.

In line with other studies, this study shows that a child protection trajectory highly impacts children's lives. First, some children describe that a child protection trajectory can be overwhelming, with many organizations and professionals being

involved (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Pöllki et al., 2012; Woolfson et al., 2010). Second, the decisions made have high impact (Pöllki et al., 2012). The long duration of the trajectory and the long time it can take to arrange issues that are important for them leads to ongoing instability in the life of the child. Continuity in the contact with parents to ensure the most possible continuity in the upbringing and stability in the living circumstances of the child (such as school, friends and sports) are essential to experience security and a future perspective. Discontinuity and instability for a longer period of time in the life of the child could harm children's well-being and development (Gaskell, 2010; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Riebschleger, Day & Damashek, 2015; Strand & Sprang, 2018).

Children's experiences with the CPS are mainly related to their interactions and relationships with professionals. In line with other studies, the feeling to be cared about and professionals being really motivated and dedicated to help them were important themes in this study (Gaskell, 2010; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Pöllki et al., 2012). It is important for children to experience that professionals are there for them; the availability of people in the personal or formal network provides children the security of being supported (Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006). Furthermore, being taken seriously, listened to and feeling understood are building blocks for a positive relationship (Gaskell, 2010; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Pöllki et al., 2012). More specifically, in addition to findings from other studies, children in our study address the importance of understanding and respecting their (bonds with) parents. This underlines how professionals' interaction with parents not only influences the outcomes of child protection trajectories via parents' experiences (Ghaffar et al., 2012), but also affects children's attitude towards the CPS. Overall, professionals need to 'get to know' children and adopt a personal approach. Respect, responsiveness and sensitiveness for the child's individual personality, needs and wishes are important for children to feel respected and understood, which in turn could benefit their independency and self-esteem (CRC, 2011; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006).

Jobe and Gorin (2013) emphasize the importance of the development of long-term relationships with professionals in order to achieve this trust relationship. However, although children addressed the complexity and impact of the involvement of many

different professionals, some children in our study shared positive experiences of feeling cared about, understood and respected with professionals who were involved for only a shorter period of time. This underlines that professionals should also invest in short-term relationships and interactions, in line with children's needs. However, it is important to consider how these short-term relationships could challenge professionals' capabilities to get insight into and respond to children's individual needs (Jobe & Gorin, 2013).

Furthermore, participation gives children a freedom of choice and helps them to gain control over their trajectory (Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Pöllki et al., 2012) and is essential to improve children's life in line with their best interests (Bell, 2011; CRC, 2009; De Winter, 2018). First, professionals need to provide clear information and 'tell it the way it is', so that children 'know where they stand'. Informing children about and preparing them for significant changes is essential to ensure that the life circumstances of the child do not change suddenly and unexpectedly (Reimer, 2010; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006). Second, children need to have some choice and control when sharing their story. This need for control concerns *what* is shared and *how* it is shared. Leeson (2007) states that experiencing power and control over one's life is important for one's health and well-being. This is even more important in the context of child protection, as experiencing violence could disempower children. By the willingness to start a dialogue, inviting children's views and giving these views weight at every point in a child protection process, child protection intervening could provide children more control over their lives and contribute to their self-respect and social competence (Bell, 2011; CRC, 2011; De Winter, 2018). On the contrary, a lack of clarity and control could lead to anxiety, insecurity, and mistrust (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Woolfson et al., 2010).

4.4.1 Strengths and limitations

This study provides in-depth insight into the needs of children in a trajectory in the Dutch CPS and shows the valuable feedback children can provide on a system which highly impacts their lives. The children involved in this study were able to distinguish their experiences with professionals and to explain their experiences with professionals' attitudes and approaches.

Furthermore, the thorough development of the methodology of this study based on the advice of young people and the practitioners improved our approach towards children and our interview scheme. By this, this study could serve other studies investigating children's experiences. In addition, the involvement of children in the different steps of this study, such as their involvement in the data analysis, strengthens this study.

At last, the heterogeneous sample is a strength of this study. There was heterogeneity regarding the age and gender of the children, but also regarding the reasons for involvement of families in the CPS, the trajectories in the system and the interventions following the investigation.

A limitation of this study lies in the recruitment of children and the gatekeeping role of adults in the recruitment. First, it was difficult to reach children directly and invite them to participate in this study. Although we aimed for this by sharing our video on social media, we only reached older children directly. We were dependent of professionals and parents to get into contact with younger children. This made that those adults could 'select' children to bring into contact with us. Concerns of adult gatekeepers to protect the well-being of vulnerable children can exclude them from participation and by this even recreate power inequalities between adults and children (Horgan, 2017; Leeson, 2007). Although we aimed to avoid this as much as possible by explaining our research project, approach and protocols in detail with organizations and professionals, we could not prevent that adults played a role in the recruitment of children. Moreover, we needed parents' permission for children's participation in our study, which made that children could not be involved when parents refused to. Besides that 'control' by adults over children's participation could be disempowering for children, this self-selection and the influence of professionals and parents on children's participation determined the sample of this study.

4.4.2 Recommendations

Research. This study could serve future research for different reasons. First, the broad method we used to investigate children's experiences with child protection may inspire researchers. Our method highly respects the needs of each individual child (Leeson,

2007) and gives children power and choice regarding their involvement as they can have different preferences (e.g. about the location of the interview). Furthermore, our study underlines the importance of sufficient time investment (e.g. for the development of the study design and recruitment) and collaboration with adult gatekeepers. It would be valuable to further investigate the gatekeeping function of adults in children's participation in research, as this makes that possibly the most vulnerable children are not reached and that children could not always make their own choice to participate. Furthermore, further research on the impact of the involvement of many different organizations and professionals on (the protection and well-being of) children is important for the evaluation of the CPS.

Practice. This study shows the important role professionals play in how children construct their experiences with child protection, via their interaction and relationship. In this, professionals' understanding and views of children and their capabilities are important. The CRC (2013) emphasizes the importance that professionals acknowledge that children are individuals and holders of their own rights when thinking about 'the best interests of the child'. It is important that children are not infantilised but taken seriously as primary service users and experts on their own experiences (Lundy et al., 2011).

First, it is important that professionals are aware of the impact of (the duration of) a child protection trajectory and the decisions following this trajectory on children and their life. Professionals need to realise that children want to go on with their (daily) life as much and as soon as possible. Therefore, they need to take them seriously and support them, for instance by ensuring contact with their parents, and supporting continuity in their daily activities such as school and sports. As children's time perceptions differ from adults' and as long processes and procedures resulting in insecurity and discontinuity can have negative consequences for children's development, quick decision-making and short trajectories are needed in the best interests of the child (CRC, 2013; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006). Professionals need to be there for children during the trajectory so that they can count on them, and they should give children the feeling that it is 'more than just their job'.

Second, awareness of the uniqueness of each individual child is important, as all children have their own characteristics, stories and needs (CRC, 2013). The willingness and effort to get to know the individual child and adopt a personal approach is needed to ensure that the child feels taken seriously and understood, but also to ensure that the individual needs and competences and complexities of problems are not overlooked (Holland, 2009). This study also shows children's differing preferences regarding ways, locations and moments of participation, and different needs regarding interventions. The CRC (2013) states that this personal approach is crucial in assessing the best interests of the child, as the diversity of children should be taken into account when determining and deciding about their interests.

Third, professionals should respect children's need for control, as this helps children to feel safe. Professionals should be clear and honest towards children and discuss with them their preferences about how, when, where and with whom they share their story. In addition, professionals can give children a choice when discussing their wishes of involvement with different organizations. Moreover, children need to experience safety and being taken seriously and understood, when they do not want to share certain details of their story. These are prerequisites that enable children to share their views at their own pace (Lundy et al., 2011).

Finally, professionals need to realise that children are capable to express their views and reflect on their own experiences and feelings (CRC, 2009; Lundy et al., 2011). The careful use by professionals of appropriate methods and their preparedness to listen to children's unique voices enables children to participate and in turn offers professionals insight into children's views (Grover, 2004; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Leeson, 2007). It is important to be aware of the power professionals have as adults in children's lives and how their views shape their interaction with children and thereby children's participation. Participation can empower vulnerable children in child protection, whereas not involving them can leave them more insecure, anxious and powerless (Leeson, 2007).